J. K. MACDONALD

ADDRESS GIVEN BY J. K. MCDONALD

We came west in April of '84 leaving the newly constructed line of the C.P.R. at Troy (later renamed Qu'Appelle). From the railroad with team and sleigh we drove some fifty miles to the homestead on the Loon Creek Plains, some ten miles of it across the rotting ice of the Qu'Appelle lakes.

The homestead to which we were coming was practically fifty miles north of Regina. The house built by my father and oldest brother who had come west over a year before was the usual construction for that time and place, that is, logs with thatched roof. I have painful recollections of the roof for the thatch was plastered down with clay and let the water through in the rainy season and the water was not only wet--it was muddy. The Loon Creek Plains are (were) perfectly level prairie intersected by occasional ravines not visible until one reached their brink. Some seven miles south of us wound the Qu'Appelle river, its banks about as high as the Saskatchewan at Edmonton but the valley much wider, and dotted along this valley were a number of Indian reservations under their Chiefs Piapot, Pasqua, Muscowpetung and Tutunkanezer and to the east and also in the valley was a small reservation known as the Sioux village under its Chief, Standing Buffalo. Standing Buffalo was the son of Sitting Bull who, you will remember, was the Chief under whose command the American Sioux accomplished what history has been pleased to miscall the Custer massacre. Standing Buffalo's band was the remanent of the tribe which following

the Custer incident sought and found refuge in Canada where, it is pleasant to know, they lived peaceful lives respecting the laws of the country that had given them sanctuary.

Piapot whom I have mentioned above was one of the more turbulent Indian Chiefs and was known as a trouble-maker. He it was who forbid the C.P.R. to build westward across what he claimed was part of his reserve. The contractors and construction gangs, however, showed complete disregard for his orders and kept on going and Piapot decided he would show them that when he spoke he meant business. So, getting a bunch of his followers on each end of a long tether rope they held the rope across the track in front of an approaching train. When the engineer stepped on the gas and hit the rope Piapot ahd his braves learned about locomotives from it.

In '84 the buffalo had disappeared from the plains but their bones were scattered plentifully over the prairies. One evening at the end of a long ride in search of our cattle which had wandered away and of which we had quite a considerable herd, I found in a ravine opening from Loon Creek a tributary of the Qu'Appelle River, evidences of a tragedy of the past. The skeletons of two buffalo lay some ten to fifteen feet apart, and between them lay the well-bleached bones of a human. There was nothing I could see to explain what had happened but with the thoughtless irreverance of youth, I swung off my horse and picked up the white skull thinking to take it home for a hanging basket for flowers

but I also recall that my mother turned the suggestion down hard and would have none of it.

The rebellion of '84 and '85 broke out in the spring following our arrival. In that turmoil the Sioux took no part but the Crees, on the reservations I have mentioned, while not participating, at least as a body, were very disturbed and restless and were clearly watching and waiting to see how things turned out before taking sides themselves. Almost continuous pow-wows were held in their camps in the valley of the Qu'Appelle and I recall one evening when in the shadows of nightfall I stood on the high bank of the Qu'Appelle listening to the beat of the tom-toms and the ceaseless chant, the "hi, hi, hi, hi", of the braves wafted up out of the night from the valley far below where the campfire gleamed, the noise weirdly rising and falling with the rise and fall of the evening breeze. Small bands of braves wandered through the settlement and while they were in a very disturbed state and in an independent and saucy frame of mind, there were no depredations committed by them. One day some four or five came into our house, one with a club like a baseball bat through the large end of which were long protruding spikes. Someone asked: "What good is that, what is that for?" The Indians'reply was "Good enough to kill white men with." The reply was a good indication of their state of mind.

Needless to say, it is fortunate for the Loon Creek settlers that the Indians did not rise and join their brothers in the north as the settlement would have been in

their direct line of march. It would be interesting to be able to tell of embattled settlers fighting bravely to protect their homes and families but nothing like that happened and if it had it would be most unlikely that there would have been any settlers left to report the incident as they were few and with little fighting equipment except the muzzle-loading shot guns of the day.

The fighting between the troops and Indians was some distance north of us and my closest association with it was, as a young boy, seeing the troops encamped at Fort Qu'Appelle on their march to the scene of fighting engaging in target practice by shooting at barrels floating in the lake.

An incident of the fight at Batoche which, so far as I know, has never been recorded in history was when the troops engaged in what was to prove the last battle of the rebellion. The Indians were in rifle pits in the valley at Batoche, in the brush, while the troops had to advance to the crest of the hill and shoot down as best they could at a well-hidden foe. The heads of the soldiers were, of course, outlined against the sky and, as a result, many of them died from head wounds. T his went on for two days with no one getting any place and General Middleton, who was in command, bemoaned that he did not have a regiment of British regulars. He was commanding a civilian army and casualties were important politically as well as from a military viewpoint; also, while he wanted to rout the Indians out with a bayonet charge he was uncertain of the result if his civilian army got into an entanglement which he feared might well result in a panic and massacre. Vainly, the under-officers begged

to be allowed to charge. The troops would fight all day and then on the approach of night be ordered back a mile or so to the night's camp. It was the third or fourth day when the officers in direct command of the battalions decided that patience had reached its limit and word was passed that when the command came that night to retire it was to be taken as a signal to charge. With the first notes of the recall that afternoon the thoroughly fed-up volunteers rose as one man and with fixed bayonets and a yell that put any Indian war whoop to shame, went down the bank on top of their thoroughly startled foes, and the battle of Batoche as well as the rebellion ended right there. History does not hand any bouquets to this altogether unmilitary proceeding and, on the contrary, the unofficial reports are that General Middleton threatened to court martial the officers concerned. History, however, is full of instances of success carrying its own absolution and this was just another one of those. There did not seem anything the general commanding could profitably do about it.

In 1898 an optimist originated the propaganda that Edmonton offered a back door to the newly discovered goldfields of the Klondike and he started something. In hundreds they came from the far and near places of the world, from England, Ireland, the United States, and Eastern Canada. Almost every walk of life was represented. Among them were a colonel from the English army, a vaudeville performer from New York, a deputy sheriff and Indian agent from Montana,

a slight-of-hand performer, and a thousand/others from Heaven only knows where. There was a real lord from Ireland--Lord Avonmore he was called--but by virtue of and in recognition of his most outstanding characteristics, he was soon, by the irreverent populace rechristened "Av-one-more". The party of which he was a member was known as "The Helpman" party, that being the name of its leader who was Colonel Helpman, and again the populace came to bat with a nick-name calling them by reason of their alleged peculiarities, "The Helpless" party. They were organized on military lines, their leader the Colonel requiring them to retire at night in their tents on the flat near the present power house, and arise in the morning to the blare of a bugle. They brought with them a heavy iron feed chopper with which to cut hay into small sections; the idea being that if the hay were so chopped it would not take the horses so long to eat and much time would be saved at the mid-day feed hour on the trail. They also brought a large supply of choice liquors and wines which they proposed to take into the north with them overlooking that its bulk and weight made its transportation almost impossible through a country where every pound would count and, further, that the area through which they were to travel was one in which the importation of intoxicating liquors, except a meagre supply on permit, was forbidden. When realization came of the liquor supply and transportation difficulties they set out to solve it by the simple expedient of consuming the stock on hand and, in this, it has been suggested they came

nearer to a perfect record for performance than in any other incident of their trip.

Unpractical equipment and preparations were not, however, limited to any one party or nationality and surprising things were done by men who should have known better. The "I W ill" Steam Sleigh Company of Chicago comprised four mechanics or reputed mechanics from that city. They rented a fairly large carpenter shop then standing where the present Strand theatre now is, and worked hard all winter building four cars not unlike the ones that accompany threshing gangs. One car was to supply the power, the next the fuel, the third was the living car, and the last would contain their supplies. The cars would be linked together. In the first they installed an expensive marine engine and boiler imported from Chicago and on which they paid a duty of $500.00 alone. Two arms projecting from the front of the first car had suspended between them an iron drum about the size of an ordinary gasoline drum. This drum was studded with stout projecting prongs or cones and was to be revolved by means of two chains connected with the engine and attached by sprockett wheels to the drum. When the power was turned on the drum was to revolve suiting itself to the inequalities of the ground as the arms permitted it to rise or fall as occasion required and the prongs would dig into the earth and, perforce, the contrivance would pull itself along. M any men tried to tell the "I Will" quartette that the country they would traverse would have dense brush and heavy timber through which the

only road, if there was one at all, would be a winding path for pack ponies so narrow the packs were always in danger of being torn from the backs of the animals, that at times they would have to cross precipitous creeks and swim rivers and their chain of cars were not practical or possible. But all doubts and suggestions were swept aside and, at last, the proud day came when the completed contrivance was to demonstrate itself down the smooth surface of Jasper Avenue. Something, however, went wrong. The machine would not work; it would not pull itself down the hard, level road. No clutch had been provided to allow the power to be gradually applied and when the machine was started it started "on high" and before momentum could be acquired something had to break--and it did. The "I Will" partnership went out of business that night and their cars were sold for junk.

One who rejoiced in the romantic name of Bruno Fabian built a galvanized iron boat like unto no other boat that was ever built. It was really two boats each about twelve feet in length and with a beam of about five feet, each being pointed at one end and cut square at the other. The two blunt ends were hinged together and under one boat runners were fastened, under the other, wheels. The scheme was simple and had something to recommend it. "When I start with snow on the ground" said Bruno, "I will load my outfit in the section equipped with runners. I will turn the other section over on top as a cover protecting my outfit from the weather. When the snow goes I reverse

to the wheeled boat and finally, when I come to the river down which I am to float, I unship both runners and wheels and launch my craft and 'all aboard for the Klondike'!" Of this scheme also nothing came, perhaps because experienced travellers saw difficulties if the galvanized iron became cut and broken far from the haunts of a tinsmith.

Texas Smith had a still more simple device. He got three heavy oak barrels. Through each he built a stout axle and in each he packed his outfit then, placing one in front of the other, he ran a strong side piece down each side connecting the three axles. On top he built a platform and to it all hitched his teams of cayuses and, seated on the platform, he waved good-bye to his friends and started out for fame, fortune, and the Klondike. He got almost to St. Albert when the staves worked loose and the bacon and the beans started to leak out along the trail and Texas turned back! Another good idea gone wrong. Years after the rush was over and the tide of gold seekers had ebbed, this boat was part of the flotsam left cast up on the shore. For several years it lay derelict in the back yard of a local hotel--first, an object of curiosity, later merely "junk".

Edmonton in 1898 was greatly different to Edmonton of today. In 1898 there was little west of the present Hudson's Bay store except bluffs through which ran some winding trails, in spots thickly populated with the tents of the Klondikers. There were other differences too. The Edmonton of '98 was a happy, care-free, community in

which everyone tried to help his neighbor and to which great prosperity and acute depression were, alike, unknown. Of its people it might truthfully have been said: "They were wealthy because their wants were few". The hotels were more like businessmen's clubs and it was the usual thing for many of its leading citizens to drop in in the closing hours of the afternoon and play a few games of "pedro" or "whiskey jack" to see who would buy the coco-cola or the the grape-juice, only there was no coco-cola or grape-juice. Into this happy family the Klondikers fitted easily and it is, perhaps, a remarkable fact that during all this busy period with hundreds of men from all callings and grades of life, far from the restraining influence of their homes and former friends, there was not one serious offence committed by any of them, and so far as can be remembered, not even one minor infraction of the law. It was natural, however, that healthy bodies and active minds should have some outlet sometimes and one form this outlet took was the playing of practical jokes. One of these was "pulling the badger". In those unenlightened days before we had the benefits of a higher civilization or knew there were such things as depressions or the dole there were places called "bars", at least so I have been told. Those were places where (allegedly) unregenerate men gathered to partake of alcoholic refreshment and it was to these bars the practical joker turned to find his prey. Assume that an innocent citizen (if it were possible for any one in such a place to be entitled to be called "innocent") to be

quietly partaking of what in those days was the equivalent of the modern coco-cola or chocolate sundae, and beside him come floating in several cheerful and loquacious souls. "Have you seen him?" says one. "The finest wild animal of his type I ever saw. You sure have to be careful, though, he doesn't get at you". This goes on until the innocent citizen, his curiosity aroused, asks what it's all about. "Why haven't you seen the badger?" "No, what badger?" The cheerful ones explain that in a stable near the Columbia Hotel, about a block away, there is a wonderful specimen of a badger, probably the largest and handsomest ever seen and one he should not, must not, miss seeing. His curiosity further aroused, the innocent one is propelled to the stable where in its dark interior there is faintly to be seen a barrel lying on its side and from a stake near its open end a stout chain disappears into the interior. "He's denned up inside" say the cheerful ones. "You'll have to pull him out, but be careful". With many warnings to see that the beast does not spring on him, the victim seizes the chain and giving it a terrific pull at the same time springs far back to safety. From the barrel there comes clattering at the end of the chain, not a badger but a battered metal receptacle which shall be nameless except to say that it is purely an article of bedroom utility, and the victim realizing that it is "on him" leads the way back to the bar to purchase absolution and help to gang-up on the next likely looking prospect.

Then there was the "Guessing-the-weight" competition. To some chosen victim would come big Dan McCauley and a pal hot in a vociferous argument that threatened any minute to break out into open warfare. Dan's occupation was moving houses and his recreation was lifting schooners. "You try to tell me you can guess weights better than I can? Why, you poor mutt, I was guessing weights when you were wearing diapers or a moss bag, whichever it was. For two straws I'd hand you one even if you were raised a pet". And so on until the selected victim thinking he had a brain-wave says: "Here you fellows, here's the way you can settle your bet. I know what I weigh. Each of you guess my weight and settle the row". "Sure, that's fine and dandy. Just stand up here". Then Big Dan, six feet three, turns his back and the victim is told to place his two hands one on each shoulder. Dan then holding the hands bends forward which, of course, raises the victim's feet well off the ground and then Dan's companion and accomplice produces from under his coat a barrel stave and applies it lustily to that portion of the victim's anatomy which is momentarily most prominent. With a rude awakening a great light dawns on the victim but there is only one thing he can do about it. "Come on, you mugs, down to the Alberta. Three chocolate sundaes, please".

It seems a rule of life that comedy and tragedy are often near companions. Into the north on the opening of Spring went a Klondiker named Strathdee, station agent from Brantford, Ontario, and his son of about twenty. From

Peace River they struck north along dim pack trails through the woods and muskeg. One morning far out on the trail young Strathdee took his gun and went out in the woods to see if he could get some fresh game. He never returned. A frantic father hunted for days and another party following up the same trail stayed to help in the hunt. Days went by, a week and more, and the broken-hearted father abandoning his trip turned back to Edmonton and his home in the East. It was a year later that the sequal was known. A trader came in from a post north of Vermilion, down the Peace. Months before, he said, he had been at a trading post far north of Vermilion. Indian hunters from a point further north and west had come into this post and told of being on a hunting trip in the country east of where Strathdee was lost and there they had come on the tracks of a white man who was lost. He was a white man because he wore boots and he was lost because his tracks wandered aimlessly and drunkenly through the brush and muskeg. They tracked him down and at last came to where he lay, face down, dead many days. His clothes and equipment corresponded with those of the lost man. There could be no doubt that it was Strathdee. Unused to the ways of the wilds and woods he had lost himself and though the weather was not unpleasant, it was early spring, he had apparently lost his head and all sense of direction and had wandered until hunger, thirst and exhaustion had claimed him as a sacrifice to the gods of the great open spaces. As his epitaph one might adapt and adopt the words

of a great writer of rhymes:

"For this is the law of the Northland and ever she makes it plain:

"Send not your foolish and feeble, send me your strong and your sane,

"Wild and wide are my borders, stern as death is my sway;

"From my ruthless throne I have ruled alone for a million years and a day;

"Hugging my mighty treasure, waiting for man to come;

"One by one I weeded them out for all that I sought was--Men,

"One by one I dismayed them frightning them sore with my glooms;

"One by one I betrayed them unto my manifold dooms.

"For this is the law of the Northland that only the Strong shall thrive,

"That surely the weak shall perish and only the Fit survive.".